

The University of Chicago

A CRITICAL
EVALUATION OF MODERN SOCIAL
TRENDS IN KOREA

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

1934

By
HONGKEE KARL

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PART FOUR

AN INTERPRETATIVE SUMMARY

The word Korea signifies two irreconcilable types of man and culture, namely, Korea of yesterday and Korea of today, each characterized by its own historical episodes and social peculiarities. The Korea of yesterday, with all its tender memories of joy and sorrow, we have found to be in the process of a progressive dissolution, to exist henceforth only in the pages of history. The other with its daring spirit and youthful vigor has been seen appearing on the world-stage. To witness the old Korea passing was not at all a pleasant experience for Koreans. To be forever separated from one's beloved is, as a matter of fact, a most difficult human experience. Especially when the career of the departed is filled with stories, human enough to create in memory a peculiar sense of pathos, the sorrow increases. And such was the truth in the case of Koreans. Yet they had no other alternative, for it seems to be the nature of history that it never repeats itself. It goes forward but never retreats. Change then seems inevitable. The old must pass away and the new must come. Man, however, sometimes attempts to prevent, to hasten, or to direct the change. In any case, change takes place just the same. Nevertheless, in these attempts lies the significance of man. For in them are manifested the wishes and aspirations of man, which do affect and alter the course of history. The rise of the new Korea furnishes us factual evidence for this claim, for here we discover a persistent insistence of

man on the right to direct his own destiny as he wishes. He believes that by manipulating carefully his intelligence and by subjecting the perplexing things of this world to a more ordered dominion of reason, he can build up a world of his own as it is shaped in his dream. So he finds himself in action in Korea. He dares and risks his life but with joy. And he finds meaning for his life in these ventures.

The problems the new Korea is now facing and the forces with which it is wrestling are manifold, but, after all, all belong to one category, namely, maladjustment. Korea is maladjusted in all respects, - economically, politically, and culturally. But why these maladjustments? There are many reasons. But the most significant is the breakdown of the old patterns of life which was too sudden and which Korea was not psychologically ready to meet. Her economic self-sufficiency based upon village economy, her political sovereignty founded upon a national paternalism, her family system built around the notion of racial continuity, her philosophy which exalted human values, her morality which put community at the center - these patterns of thought and behavior in which Koreans were raised and nurtured had to pass away. This inevitable passing of these patterns meant a loss of anchorage on the part of Koreans.

Various forces were responsible for this cultural uprooting. The coming of Christianity was one. It carried with it an established system of belief and pattern of behavior. There was an inherent philosophical difficulty in the system which was somewhat of an unintelligible nature. The obvious ones are (1) its dualistic departmentalization of the universe; (2) the peculiar notion of hereditary sin; and (3) the doctrine of salvation centered around the sacrifice of the Divine Son. For the

time being, Korea resisted. Christianity nevertheless entered the land and has remained there.

More destructive was the coming of science. It had two main effects: (1) science as philosophy of the universe replaced the traditional ideas of nature; and (2) science as means of practical life upset the modes of production and communication. This meant the passing of the old handicraft industry, thus creating new evils in industrial life, and the replacement of the time-favored methods of communication by the modern, thus shortening time and space.

The wholesale importation of social and political ideas was still greater in effect. Because the problems which are becoming more and more acute in Korea are social and political in nature. Especially important are such ideas as democracy and humanitarianism, which challenged traditional authorities, insisting upon equality and freedom, and dominated the early liberalistic reform movements. In the domain of political life, it was nationalism which helped the people to discover their nationality. Proletarianism is the latest importation which now controls the beliefs of most of the young intelligentsia.

Imperialism is perhaps the most successful power that has entered, bringing destruction to the political sovereignty of the nation, and that is now most successfully absorbing her economic resources. This alien imperialism has set up in the place of the traditional monarchy an agent to carry out its political and commercial plans and to check the "undesirable" forces that hinder its success. Seen from the standpoint of Korea, imperialism means denial of an adequate political and legal protection, and consequently, a confiscation of just rights. The true meaning of government lies not in the limitation of

people's freedom but in protection of it. It guarantees all individuals an equal right to develop themselves and to enjoy life. But the imperialistic agent in Korea has only the duty to carry out the imperial policies, drafted in the light of its own interests, which necessarily limits the freedom of Koreans.

It means furthermore a denial of the Korean's right to economic survival. That is to say, one of the chief interests of imperialism lies in economic gain in the colony. And in order to satisfy this wish of imperialism, Korea must lose forever. To lose forever means an eventual bankruptcy of Korea.

In addition to these external forces, imposed upon Korea, there were inherent causes which hindered a rational development of Korea. In the sphere of politics, Korea failed to control the tyranny of nobles, to limit the factional disputes between parties, and to achieve military strength enough to meet the imperialistic challenges. The government exalted pacifism in an age of mutual conquest and a policy of isolation when nations were interrelated. And when she, under the pressure of external powers, opened her doors the flood of forces rushed into her limited space so rapidly that she no longer was able to control the torrent.

Korea's failure to unify the divided society into a consistent whole was another cause for the decay. She was divided in two respects, biologically and economically. Anyone who was once born of a family of high distinction, whether physically paralyzed or mentally feeble-minded, was given special social privileges. On the other hand, one who was born of a family of low distinction, however superior in ability, was forever stigmatized and stripped of equal rights. In other words, an accidental cause in terms of birth determined quality and social dis-

tinctions.

Division of society on the basis of economic life was another sad episode. It was sad because the society considered the producer as contemptible. Consumers of the leisure class were given special social prestige. Two reasons may be found for this idea. First, production was chiefly done by animals, slaves and commoners, which led them to identify "work" with menials. Second, the unprecedented policy of the founders of the Lee dynasty to employ philosopher-politicians in the government gave rise to a new standard for comparing social standing and personal success in terms of learning. To be a politician by being a scholar was regarded as superior to any other occupation.

Defects in ideological systems were none the less hindering. For example, Hanistic overemphasis upon the hedonistic ethical ideals limited man's creativity and maximized consumption of already created values. Notes of lament over the transiency of life and the consequent urges toward materialistic enjoyment filled folk poetries. Confucian hypocrisy, resulting from its literal application of li to daily life, which created unnecessary ritualism and formalism in politics, is another illustration. Buddhism, too, is important in this respect, because it, with its supermundane prejudice, emphasized the insignificance of practical affairs and faithfully carried on its policy of isolation in the forest.

Because of these factors the Korea of yesterday had to go, and in the place of her old practices and beliefs are now found new and unfamiliar things. Between this old and new lies the chasm which baffles her. Here she is confused and disillusioned. She nevertheless has tried and is still trying to redeem

herself from chaos.

Korea is now passing through a process of trial and error. Two distinctly different methods present themselves, the one evolutionary and the other revolutionary. Evolutionism believes in gradual orientation of society by means of liberal reform methods. Education of the people, teaching peasants modern methods of farming, reformation of customs, social and family systems, attainment of new moral qualities, etc., are some of the techniques of evolutionists. Revolutionists, on the other hand, believe in the adoption of violence. Only by getting hold of economic and political powers can one introduce any reform plans. Overthrow of the existing powers and abolition of the present systems are the first step toward the real reform. Reformation of systems, culture, morality, humanitarianism and other high-sounding phrases are declared worthless. Should such legal methods be adopted, due to the demands of the situation, they may be, not a substitution for revolution, but an auxiliary means to the overthrow of the imperialistic politics and bourgeois economy.

Historically, a revolt of peasants, known as Tonghak, was the first significant gesture toward modernity. It was a revolt against the tyranny of political power and suppression of the upper classes, and a protest against the cultural invasion of the West. It insisted upon democracy in politics, equality in social relationships, and revival of "Eastern learnings" in the sphere of ideas. The movement steadily grew despite external hostilities. Tonghak is now known as Chuntoism

There are two significant aspects in Chuntoism. First, it holds the philosophy of innaichun which centers around the notion that man is the supreme reality of the world. Hanul is

man. The old metaphysical question in the West on the nature of mind and matter is resolved into a simple naturalistic formula, mulshimilchei, indicating the unity of mind and matter. When applied to man, mulshimilchei makes him a psycho-physical organism.

Second, it accepts one of the most radical social doctrines, namely, Marxian socialism, for its social gospel. Chuntoism, however, does not confine itself to Marxism. Hence the irreconcilable difficulty between Marx's economic determinism and Chuntoist's humanistic indeterminism. It insists that Marxism should be humanized.

The rise of Kaiwha liberals in the latter part of the nineteenth century was an attempt of bourgeois liberals to save themselves from approaching doom. Their ideal in general was twofold, namely, political and social. Their political ideal was (1) to restore the authority of the Emperor by suppressing the powers of nobles, litterati, and petty local officials; (2) to inaugurate an enlightened open door policy; (3) to create a new chauvinistic sentiment with the view to solidify the nation in the presence of imperialistic aggression; and (4) to adopt a form of constitutional monarchy, whereby the dignity and authority of the imperial line could be maintained, and at the same time, a political interest could be developed in the minds of the people.

Their social ideals may be simplified in one word, namely, democracy, meaning that all men are equal. On this ideal basis, they formulated their social program for the reformation of traditional mores and habits.

In 1905 the protectorate was declared by Japanese imperialism. In 1910 annexation was accomplished, and in 1919

Korea denounced both. The denunciation, however, was late, because the wrong to be righted was rooted too deeply. Korea then realized the need of systematic and planned action rather than mere protests.

Two forces are at work in Korea today, nationalism and socialism. Nationalism represents a national aspiration to abolish the foreign domination and to set up its own. With this view in mind, nationalists emphasized Korea's cultural and racial distinctions, magnified her historical glory and nourished the people upon the spirit of anti-Japanese sentiment, thus focusing the national sentiment on a common target.

Socialism means, negatively, (1) abolition of militaristic, imperialistic rule by Japan; (2) abolition of capitalistic economy and its private ownership; and (3) that of all unequalitarian human relationships. It means positively (1) promotion of international cooperation for world peace; (2) adoption of socialistic economy and collective ownership to achieve a classless society; and (3) inauguration of a truly human society in which men share in production and enjoyment of values, and in furtherance of human progress. Nationalism, now tending toward Fascism, is headed by middle class intellectuals, while socialism is led by young radicals and supported by workers.

Whether an action inevitably creates a reaction is questionable. However, our observation of the social trends in Korea reveals an interesting fact that all reactionary gestures are usually dictated by some definite interests. For instance, the recent reinforcement of the imperialistic pressure upon progressive movements is a result of imperialistic fear of the collapse of its supremacy, or a wish to preserve its status quo by postponing its downfall.

Confucianism furnishes us material which reassures us that a religion may be a useful instrument by which the ruling classes may control the people, by reaffirming its traditional principles and habits. In doing so, the particular religion may enable itself to restore, at the grace of political powers, its lost prestige and privileges. Politics and religion, here, find their common interests, which make mutual aid possible. Both become reactionary when their interest lies in preserving the status quo.

The iconoclastic attitude in Korea, when observed from the point of view of a rationalistic religious historian, hardly escapes the charge that it is unreasonable for the simple reason that its chief technique is in negation rather than in affirmation, and a negation unfortunately does not maintain itself. Furthermore, men like John Dewey and others conceive religion in terms of "means for realizing the highest values of life,"¹ which conception of religion makes the iconoclast's contention absurd. That is to say, iconoclasm if it be honest should be motivated by the human urge "to realize the highest values of life," which is religion. He may, of course, be justified in denying some religions, which do hinder progress, but it does not mean that he denies all religions. Furthermore, he cannot deny all religions without absurdity, for some religions are truly valuable "means for realizing the highest values of life."

Korea now finds herself in social chaos and mental frustration. She is suffering not so much by the hostilities of nature as those of man, and these human evils have tired her. A

¹"A Humanist Manifesto," The New Humanist (Chicago), May-June, 1933, pp. 1 ff.

significant factor, however, is the birth of the sense of common doom, which psychological complex gave rise to a new virility and venturous actions. And this is perhaps due to her discovery that she has been, perforce, thrust out of her ancient complacency into a world in which she has been exploited, victimized, deprived of her just rights. So she wishes to reassert and attain those rights. The present Korea thus presents to an observer a kaleidoscopic scene with dramatic touches of smiles and tears, chivalry and romance. The hope of Korea lies in her resolute acceptance of her responsibilities to meet these evils, social and political, so as to construct a free and universal world in which all men voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. It is the truly democratic life in a shared world-condition, that the young Korea now demands. By this just claim and positive morale she is and will be guided, and from this perspective her techniques, each suitable to each occasion, will flow.

Taking a broader outlook, we discover that these problems are not the burden of Korea only. They are common problems for all men and all nations. The difference may be found in degree. Here Korea should find her comrades, who would share her cup. As Rabindranath Tagore says, "The problem is a world problem. No nation can find its own salvation by breaking away from others. We must all be saved or we must perish together." In this co-operative spirit, humanity shall go forward for its final victory.

Seen from the cosmic perspective, the human drama is, after all, an incidental episode. Man's struggle for building his own Utopian castle is at last a dream. For we know that humanity cannot escape the final collapse which is approaching.

So laments a philosopher:

Let it be so. Meanwhile millions upon millions of human beings will strive and suffer and enjoy. They will suffer more and more and enjoy less and less, or suffer less and less and enjoy more and more. And the chief source of their misery or happiness will be human beings and the structure of society. It will mean defeat if in the distant future the cooperative adventure of making human life richer and happier is interrupted by a change in the cosmic weather, but a kind of defeat which is at the same time the highest form of victory. Real defeat will overtake humanity only in so far as men themselves, forgetting that they are comrades in doom and agents of each other's woe or weal, go down the years estranged from the one friend they have - each other.¹

Realizing that his heroism may never redeem himself and his friend from the ultimate catastrophe, the Korean nevertheless continues his good fight. In doing so, he only comes nearer to his triumphant defeat in the majestic but tragic cosmic drama. So here ends the present, and here are opened the gates of the future.

¹M. C. Otto, Things and Ideals (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1924), p. 293.

